



Narcissism and academic dishonesty: The exhibitionism dimension and the lack of guilt

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is associated with morally questionable behavior in the workplace, but little is known about the role of specific dimensions of narcissism or the mechanism behind these effects. The current study assessed academic dishonesty among college students. One hundred and ninety-nine participants either self-reported or reported others' cheating behavior and completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The exhibitionism dimension of the NPI predicted greater cheating; this effect was explained by the lack of guilt. The effects of exhibitionism held for the self but not other-report conditions, highlighting the key role of the self in narcissism. Findings held when controlling for relevant demographic variables and other narcissism factors. Thus the narcissists' ambitions for their own academic achievement lead to cheating in school, facilitated by a lack of guilt for their immoral behavior.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism has been used to describe both a clinical condition and a normal personality trait. Individuals with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD; Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) exaggerate their talents and think that they are special and unique. Interpersonally, narcissists are arrogant, exploitive, and lack empathy for others. Personality-social psychologists, in contrast, view narcissism as a personality dimension that is measured in the normal population (for reviews, see Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). One can conceptualize a narcissist as someone who has inflated, positive self-views, a self-regulatory style that maintains these self-views, and shallow interpersonal relationships. For example, narcissists are self-serving (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998), self-centered (Emmons, 1987), and unlikely to consider how their decisions can affect others (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005). In interpersonal contexts, a narcissist's goal is to acquire social status by associating with high-status people (Campbell, 1999). They desire admiration (Campbell, 1999; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and will show-off, brag, and draw attention to themselves (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) to get it.

One challenge for narcissists is how to appear impressive when there are clear measures of performance. Narcissists use many ap-

proaches to maintain a positive self-image. Narcissists inflate their performance in achievement domains (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998) and frequently fail to acknowledge the contributions of others (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998; John & Robins, 1994). Narcissists shine when there is an opportunity for glory, but underperform when such opportunities are not available (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). This drive for performance may push narcissists to set aside ethical norms to maintain inflated self-views. Thus, it is probably not too surprising that in the workplace, narcissism is associated with several negative behaviors, such as impulsive, risky decision-making (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007), counterproductive workplace behavior (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006; Penney & Spector, 2002), and white collar crime (Blickle, Schlegel, Fassbender, & Klein, 2006), which indicate that narcissists will do what it takes to get ahead.

Excellence in academics is highly valued in many societies and is seen as a gateway to status and power. This presents a challenge for narcissists because performance is often measured against standards that allow for direct comparison to peers. Overall, little is known about the role of narcissism and violating ethical norms in academics, such as cheating to achieve academic performance. One study (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009, Study 3) found that narcissism was associated with rationalized cheating, which is when people do not explicitly intend to cheat, but rather explain away their behavior so they can interpret it as something other than cheating (see von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005). However,

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in the case of deliberative cheating, when people cheat through explicit intention, the positive association with narcissism was not reliable (Brown et al., 2009, Study 3). Such findings highlight the use of rationalization in narcissistic functioning (e.g., Mykel, 1985). Thus, while research in workplace settings indicate a generalized tendency to set aside moral standards in order to get ahead, the impact of narcissism on similar behaviors in academics remains unanswered.

In the domain of morality, it is often the case that the experience or anticipation of negative emotions, such as shame and guilt, determines whether or not moral behavior will take place (e.g., Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). For example, among college students, guilt-proneness was negatively associated with the likelihood of stealing (Tangney et al., 2007) and self-reported criminal activity (Tibbetts, 2003). It follows, then, that the experience or anticipation of shame and guilt would deter students from engaging in academic misconduct (Staats, Hupp, & Hagley, 2008). Narcissists are less likely than non-narcissists to experience guilt (Campbell, Foster, & Brunell, 2004), leaving them more susceptible to engaging in immoral behavior, such as academic misconduct. Thus, a lack of guilt could be expected among those who are more likely to engage in behaviors that violate moral standards.

In the present study, we examine the extent to which narcissism predicts self-reported academic misconduct. Recently, scholars have described narcissists as individuals who (a) desire power, (b) show off whenever they get the chance, and (c) believe that they are special (Kubarych, Deary, & Austin, 2004). A case can be made that each of these dimensions of narcissism could predict cheating. Narcissists desire power, as demonstrated by their high achievement motivation (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Novacek, 1991; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and desire for prestigious and influential occupations (Roberts & Robins, 2000). In their pursuit for power, it could be that narcissists are willing to engage in immoral behavior, including academic dishonesty. Narcissists have been described as exhibitionists because of their tendency to show off to gain admiration. It has been suggested that exhibitionism is narcissists' mechanism for flaunting their superiority to others (Rose & Campbell, 2004). In their quest to demonstrate impressive academic performance, it could be that narcissists are willing to engage in academic dishonesty. Finally, narcissists believe that they are special and unique, and therefore entitled to more than others are. Because the closely related variable of entitlement is associated with cheating intentions (Brown et al., 2009, Study 3), believing that one is a special person could also be associated with academic dishonesty. Thus, the current research explores the role of narcissism in academic dishonesty, focusing on which dimensions within narcissism are most directly involved.

In the present study, participants were first asked to complete the NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and a questionnaire concerning either (a) their own cheating behavior and guilt for cheating, or (b) their perception of the typical student's cheating behavior and guilt for cheating. With its emphasis on the self, narcissism is expected to be associated with greater cheating by the self, but narcissism is not expected to be associated with reports of cheating by others. Thus, this manipulation should highlight whether the self is required for any observed relationships between narcissism and reported cheating behaviors. It is likely that responses will represent a self-enhancing pattern of responding where others are seen as more likely to engage in cheating behavior than the self, as in past research (Staats et al., 2008). In addition, participants reported gender and age, which have also been associated with academic dishonesty (McCabe & Trevino, 1997), with males and college students being more likely to cheat. Finally, because academic dishonesty is inversely related to academic achievement

(McCabe & Trevino, 1997), participants reported their grade point average.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 199 Introductory Psychology students (56.3% women) at a regional Midwestern college. Participants were 19.87 years old on average ($SD = 4.29$).¹

2.2. Materials and procedure

Narcissism was measured using the 40-item NPI (Raskin & Terry, 1988), which is a forced choice measure. Each item on the NPI contains a pair of statements (e.g., "I am no better or no worse than most people" versus "I think I am a special person"); a score of 1 is assigned to the narcissistic response and a score of 0 is assigned to the non-narcissistic response. Scores are summed across the 40 items; higher scores represent higher levels of trait narcissism. The NPI is a commonly used self-report measure of narcissism in normal populations and has adequate reliability and validity (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Internal reliability was good for the present sample ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 16.66$, $SD = 6.78$). Kubarych et al. (2004) describe a 3-factor solution to the NPI that contains the 10-item power dimension ($\alpha = .73$, $M = 4.5$, $SD = 2.52$), the 5-item exhibitionism dimension ($\alpha = .67$, $M = 1.52$, $SD = 1.38$), and the 8-item special person dimension ($\alpha = .57$, $M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.65$). These subscales were computed by summing the responses to items on each dimension. The remaining NPI items were not used in creating the subscales.

Self-esteem was assessed as a control variable using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). Internal reliability across the 10-item scale was good ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 39.89$, $SD = 6.37$).

The next questionnaire assessed academic dishonesty and any associated feelings of guilt. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions by receiving cheating questionnaires referring to either the Self ($n = 99$) or a typical student on campus (Other; $n = 100$). Guilt concerning academic dishonesty was assessed using four questions from the Agnew and Peters (1986) measure of the neutralization of guilt. The first question asked how guilty participants would feel in general for cheating on an exam (1 = *not too guilty*, 2 = *somewhat guilty*, 3 = *very guilty*). The next three questions used the same scale and asked how guilty they would feel for cheating if (a) the instructor gave an overly difficult exam, (b) classmates refused to share notes or help out, and (c) friends pressured the participant to cheat. Reliability for the measure of guilt was adequate ($\alpha_{\text{Self}} = .82$, $\alpha_{\text{Other}} = .64$).

The next three questions asked participants about academic dishonesty. The first two questions asked participants the number of times they (others) cheated on exams and assignments during the past 12 months. Respondents indicated the number of times they (others) have cheated using the following categories: 0 times, 1–2 times, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, and more than 10 times. The third question asked respondents to use a five-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statement, "In the next 30 days, I (the typical student on campus) will cheat in one of my (their) classes." Reliability for this measure was good ($\alpha_{\text{Self}} = .79$, $\alpha_{\text{Other}} = .74$).

Finally, participants reported their grade point average, gender and age.

¹ Eight participants were dropped for failure to complete all measures. Restricting the sample to the 199 participants did not meaningfully alter any results.

Table 1
Means and standard deviations of variables in the Self and Other condition.

Variable	Self (n = 99)		Other (n = 100)		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Narcissism (NPI total)	16.06	6.79	17.26	6.75	-1.25
NPI power	4.45	2.62	4.54	2.43	-.25
NPI exhibitionism	1.42	1.39	1.61	1.38	-.95
NPI special person	2.86	1.66	3.23	1.63	-1.61
Self-esteem	39.03	6.61	40.73	6.03	-1.90
Academic dishonesty	1.86	.94	2.94	.97	-7.92***
Guilt	2.14	.59	1.74	.45	5.29***
GPA	2.88	.67	2.88	.60	.04
Age	19.96	4.22	19.77	4.37	.32

*** p < .001.

3. Results

The means and standard deviations for the measures of narcissism, self-esteem, guilt, academic dishonesty, GPA, and age for the Self and Other conditions are in Table 1. Consistent with expectations, participants in the Other condition reported more academic dishonesty and less guilt than people in the Self condition. Consistent with random assignment to condition, no differences were observed in narcissism scores, self-esteem, GPA, and age. In addition, the gender breakdown between groups was similar ($\chi^2 = .30$, $p = .58$).

The correlation of variables in the Self and Other conditions are displayed in Tables 2A and 2B. In the Self condition, narcissism was associated with academic dishonesty, but not with guilt. A look at

Table 3
Regression of NPI factors and control factors on guilt and academic dishonesty in the Self and Other condition.

Variable	Self (n = 99)		Other (n = 100)	
	Guilt	Behavior	Guilt	Behavior
Exhibitionism (NPI)	-.30**	.27*	.04	-.05
Special person (NPI)	.15	-.13	.09	.17
Power (NPI)	.13	.08	-.14	.07
Self-esteem	.11	-.08	.20	-.34**
GPA	.03	-.05	-.03	.10
Gender	-.32**	.11	.02	.10
Age	.34**	-.22*	.06	-.10
R ²	.30	.17	.06	.15

Note: Standardized betas (b) and overall R² from multiple regression. For gender, women = 0 and men = 1.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

the three dimensions of narcissism reveals that exhibitionism and power were associated with academic dishonesty, but special person was not. Self-esteem was not associated with academic dishonesty. Of these variables, only exhibitionism was associated with the anticipation of guilt for cheating; those who score high on exhibitionism reported lower levels of guilt. In addition, older students were less likely to report academic dishonesty and more likely to anticipate feeling guilty for cheating. There were no gender differences with respect to admitting academic dishonesty, but men were less likely to experience guilt for academic dishonesty.

Table 2A
Correlation of variables in the Self (n = 99) condition.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Narcissism (NPI total)	-								
Exhibitionism (NPI)	.71***	-							
Power (NPI)	.85***	.50***	-						
Special person (NPI)	.72***	.42***	.51***	-					
Self-esteem	.29**	.09	.19*	.42***	-				
Academic dishonesty	.23*	.29***	.20*	.03	-.09	-			
Guilt	-.11	-.25**	-.04	.06	.14	-.54***	-		
GPA	-.05	-.07	-.02	.13	.23*	-.14	.19*	-	
Gender	.16	.13	.12	.03	.05	.13	-.31**	-.24*	-
Age	-.25*	-.14	-.22*	-.20*	-.04	-.24*	.30**	.08	.09

Note: Women = 0, men = 1.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

*** p < .001.

Table 2B
Correlation of variables in the Other (n = 100) condition.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
Narcissism (NPI total)	-								
Exhibitionism (NPI)	.66***	-							
Power (NPI)	.82***	.44***	-						
Special person (NPI)	.67***	.24*	.42***	-					
Self-esteem	.25**	.13	.18	.23*	-				
Academic dishonesty	.10	-.01	.08	.14	-.27**	-			
Guilt	.01	.02	-.04	.08	.20*	-.52***	-		
GPA	.08	.07	.01	.11	.14	.06	.01	-	
Gender	.21*	.02	.21*	.16	.18	.08	.04	.003	-
Age	-.02	-.04	.05	-.04	.09	-.14	.07	-.01	-.02

Note: Women = 0, men = 1.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

*** p < .001.

In the Other condition, narcissism was not associated with the perception of other students' academic dishonesty or how much guilt they believed other students experience when they cheat. Further, none of the dimensions of narcissism were associated with the perception of academic dishonesty and guilt. However, people with higher self-esteem were less likely to perceive their classmates as engaging in academic dishonesty and more likely to believe their classmates would experience guilt for cheating.

The initial analyses indicated that the three factors of narcissism had distinct roles in guilt and academically dishonest behavior, so multiple-regression analyses were conducted using the dimensions as separate predictors. Initial analyses were conducted incorporating the three factors of narcissism (exhibitionism, special person, and power), self-esteem, and demographic variables relevant to guilt and dishonesty (gender, age, and GPA). Gender was dummy coded (women = 0, men = 1). All variables were regressed simultaneously on guilt as well as academic dishonesty with separate analyses in the Self and Other conditions (see Table 3).²

Predictors of past and future academic dishonesty were investigated first. In the Self condition, exhibitionism predicted dishonest behavior, $b = .27$, $t(91) = 2.31$, $p < .05$. Age also predicted academic dishonesty, $b = -.22$, $t(91) = -2.17$, $p < .05$, consistent with prior findings (all other factors, $p > .12$). By contrast, in the Other condition, exhibitionism failed to predict dishonest behavior, $b = -.05$, $t(92) = 0.46$, $p = .65$. Self-esteem was the only factor to predict estimates of others' academic dishonesty, $b = -.34$, $t(92) = -3.32$, $p < .01$, (all other factors, $p > .20$).

Parallel analyses were conducted predicting guilt. In the Self condition, exhibitionism predicted guilt, $b = -.30$, $t(91) = -2.80$, $p < .01$. Age also predicted guilt, $b = .34$, $t(91) = 3.72$, $p < .01$, as did gender, with men reporting less guilt than women, $b = -.32$, $t(91) = -3.44$, $p < .01$. None of the other additional factors were reliable (all $p > .20$). In the Other condition, exhibitionism failed to predict guilt, $b = .04$, $t(92) = 0.39$, $p = .70$. The only factor to approach reliability was the effect of self-esteem on guilt, $b = .20$, $t(92) = 1.84$, $p = .07$, (all others factors, $p > .20$). Thus, when referring to the self, exhibitionism predicted feeling less guilty for being dishonest and more academic dishonesty and no effects were observed for the other factors of narcissism. Consistent with the key role of the self, there was no impact of exhibitionism on either guilt or behavior when referring to others.

3.1. Self–Other condition comparison

Further multiple-regression analyses were conducted to establish that the relationships between exhibitionism, guilt, and academic dishonesty were reliably different for Self and Other conditions as suggested by the earlier analyses. In addition to the expected Self–Other \times exhibitionism interaction, it was expected that the Self condition would lead to more guilt and less academic dishonesty than the Other condition. The Self–Other manipulation was dummy coded (Other = 0, Self = 1), and exhibitionism was mean centered to simplify the interpretation of effects. Analyses were conducted in a hierarchical manner, so that the main effects were entered in the first step, two-way interactions in the second step. Each effect was evaluated in the step in which it was added, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991).

When exhibitionism and the Self–Other manipulation were regressed on guilt, a main effect indicated that more guilt was reported for the self than others, $b = .34$, $t(199) = 5.26$, $p < .001$. There was also a marginal effect of exhibitionism indicating that

overall higher exhibitionism tended to be associated with less guilt, $b = -.12$, $t(199) = -1.86$, $p = .06$. However, these main effects were qualified by the critical overall two-way Self–Other \times exhibitionism interaction, $b = -.19$, $t(198) = -2.15$, $p < .05$. This interaction was decomposed by investigating the impact of identification separately for participants in the Self and Other conditions. Consistent with the earlier analyses, exhibitionism was associated with less guilt in the Self condition, $b = -.26$, $t(198) = -2.85$, $p < .01$, but showed no relationship with guilt in the Other condition, $b = .02$, $t(198) = 0.18$, $p = .86$, see Fig. 1A.

When exhibitionism and the Self–Other manipulation were regressed on academic dishonesty, fewer dishonest behaviors were reported for the self than others, $b = -.49$, $t(198) = -7.91$, $p < .001$, and a second main effect indicated that exhibitionism predicted more dishonest behaviors, $b = .12$, $t(198) = 1.98$, $p < .05$. However, these main effects were qualified by the critical overall two-way Self–Other \times exhibitionism interaction, $b = .18$, $t(197) = 2.08$, $p < .05$. The impact of exhibitionism was investigated separately for participants in the Self and Other conditions. In the Self condition, exhibitionism was associated with more dishonest behavior, $b = .25$, $t(197) = 2.89$, $p < .01$, but showed no relationship with dishonesty in the Other condition, $b = -.01$, $t(198) = -0.05$, $p = .96$, see Fig. 1B. Overall, these analyses show that the effects observed in the Self condition, that exhibitionism predicted less guilt and more academic dishonesty, were reliably different from the null effects of exhibitionism observed in the Other condition.

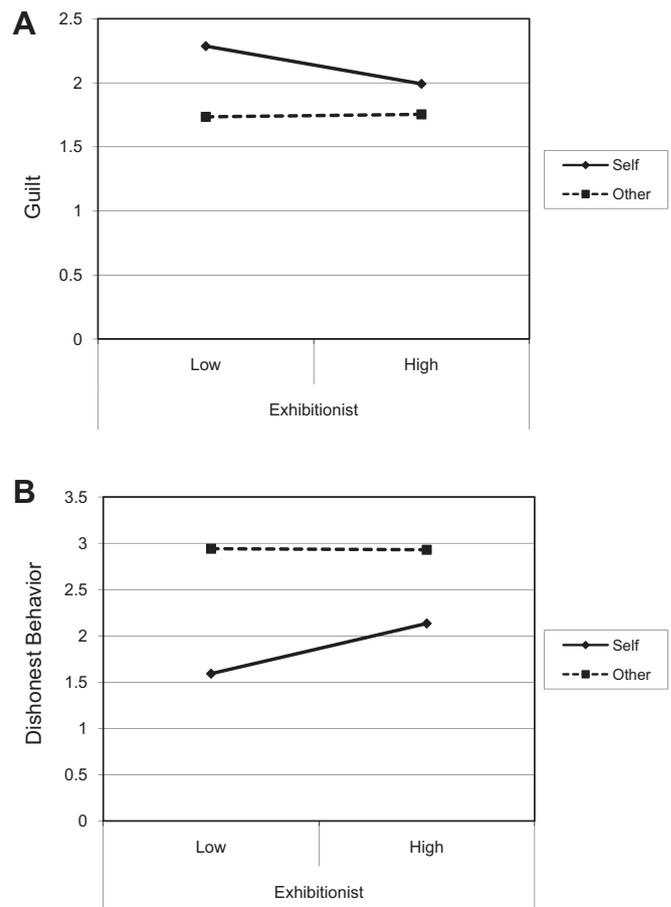


Fig. 1. Exhibitionism predicting guilt (A) and academic dishonesty (B) for the self and others. Exhibitionism was handled as a continuous variable with means plotted at +1 SD and –1 SD.

² These analyses were also conducted using total NPI scores, which did not predict cheating or guilt in either the Self or Other conditions.

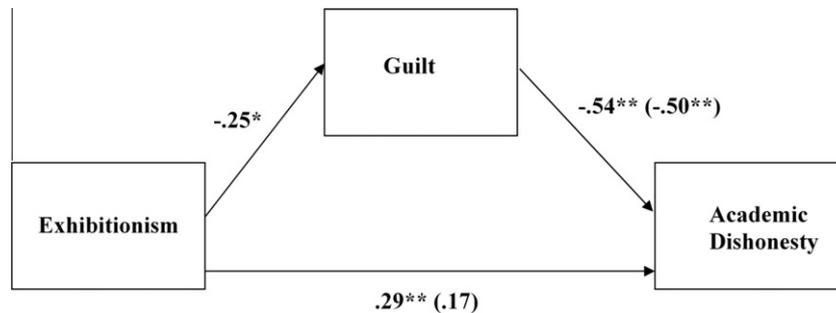


Fig. 2. The association between exhibitionism and academic dishonesty, as fully mediated through guilt in response to dishonesty. Standardized betas are reported. Coefficients inside parentheses represent parameter estimates for a regression model containing both predictors. Asterisks indicate parameter estimates that differ from zero at $p < .05$, $^{**} p < .01$.

3.2. Mediation analyses

Within the Self condition, the mirror image effects of exhibitionism on guilt and academically dishonest behavior suggest that guilt could serve as a key explanation for the relationship between exhibitionism and dishonest behavior. Following Baron and Kenny (1986), mediation analysis was conducted to assess whether guilt mediated the impact of exhibitionism on academically dishonest behaviors.

The regression analyses were conducted using exhibitionism as the independent variable, academic dishonesty as the dependent variable and guilt as the mediator (see Fig. 2). Prior analysis established that in the Self condition, exhibitionism predicted both guilt and academic dishonesty, satisfying two criterion for mediation. To test the third criterion, dishonest behavior was regressed on exhibitionism and guilt. Experiencing less guilt significantly predicted dishonest behavior ($b = -.50$, $p < .001$). In addition, exhibitionism was reduced to a marginal predictor of dishonest behavior ($b = .17$, $p = .06$). Results from the Sobel (1982) test established a reliable reduction in the path from exhibitionism to dishonest behavior when guilt was included in the regression equation ($z = 2.33$, $p < .05$). This suggests that guilt mediates the relationship between exhibitionism and dishonest behavior (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

4. Discussion

The present study demonstrated a link between narcissism and academic dishonesty. Further, this study investigated the three dimensions of narcissism and identified, for the first time, the unique role of exhibitionism, which was associated with academic dishonesty above and beyond the other dimensions of narcissism and control variables. Exhibitionism reflects narcissists' desire for admiration and functions as a means to demonstrate superiority to others (Rose & Campbell, 2004). Thus, in order to succeed and impress others academically, it appears that exhibitionists are willing to cheat their way to the top.

Our research also offers a mechanism for the link between exhibitionism and academic dishonesty. Exhibitionists report that they experience less guilt for cheating. Critically, this occurs for self but not other ratings. Thus, the observed effects reflect exhibitionists' lack of compunction in response to their own immoral behavior rather than a generalized lack of moral standards for everyone. Although narcissism was not associated with academic dishonesty or guilt in the Other condition, self-esteem was negatively associated with the perception that other students are engaging in academic dishonesty. At the same time, students with higher self-esteem also report higher GPAs. Thus, it may be that students with higher self-esteem have less inclination to cheat—perhaps because of confidence in their own abilities—and also experience less

pressure to cheat because they assume that others are cheating to a lesser extent than do those with lower self-esteem.

Based on previous research (Staats et al., 2008), we expected to find that participants would indicate less academic dishonesty and more guilt in response to academic dishonesty in the Self condition than in the Other condition. Our analyses confirmed this expectation. Research shows that when people are asked to judge others, they tend to incorporate self-relevant information, in part because they overestimate how much their self-relevant information is shared by others (Vorauer, in press). Thus, it is likely that the motivation to maintain a positive self-view plays a role in reporting greater academic dishonesty for others than for the self. One question for future research is how well self-reported behavior reflects actual behavior. Although self-factors unrelated to actual behavior likely influenced responses, participants did divulge cheating behaviors across levels of narcissism, and the current effects were consistent with previous associations between narcissism and cheating, suggesting that responses reflected actual cheating behavior.

It was somewhat surprising that the power and special person dimensions did not play a role in self-reported academic dishonesty. Future research is needed to further explore the association between these two factors and academic dishonesty.

In sum, narcissists are more inclined to engage in academic dishonesty. This finding adds to the literature on narcissism and immoral behaviors more generally, such as that explored in organizational contexts. It is likely that the same people who engage in counterproductive workplace behavior (Judge et al., 2006), and white collar crime (Blickle et al., 2006) are also the ones cheating in the classroom.

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